

December 17, 2020



Nancy Patricia Gutiérrez Castañeda
Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights and International Affairs
Calle 7 #6-54
Casa Republicana
Bogota
Colombia

VIA EMAIL

RE: Human Rights situation in Colombia

Dear Commissioner,

On behalf of over 3 million union members in Canada, we are writing to express our concern about the deteriorating human rights crisis in Colombia. We have long-standing relations with the Colombian trade union and social movements and for many years have accompanied leaders and activists working in defence of peace and human rights in the country. We urge you to take measurable actions to stop the assassinations of human rights defenders, and urge the Colombian government to comply with commitments to implement the peace agreement signed with the FARC-EP.

By every account, Colombia is now the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders, including trade unionists. It is particularly worrying that violence is mainly targeted at those historically most impacted by conflict and state abandonment, among them Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant communities, people who defend the right to land and the environment and the implementation of the peace agreement. Civil society organizations like the Institute for Development and Peace (INDEPAZ) report that over 250 community leaders have been killed this year alone, while more than a thousand have been murdered since the signing of the peace agreement. But these numbers continue to climb. Meanwhile, countless others, among them our partners, have received death threats and live in fear, given the lack of effective action to protect them.

Together with our Colombian partners, we celebrated the signing of the historic peace agreement in 2016 and shared their hope that the human rights and

humanitarian situation would improve. Canada also supported that cause as a major donor to peacebuilding in Colombia. Yet, for the past four years, the situation has consistently deteriorated and the implementation of the peace agreement is at a virtual standstill. For almost all of the peace accord's chapters, the tools and institutions developed to ensure meaningful implementation face funding limitations, while the actions or lack thereof by key government officials have effectively impeded implementation. One example is the National Commission on Security Guarantees, which is not convened with nearly enough frequency to comply with its objective of addressing the dismantling of armed groups.

On the labour front, the 2020 Global Rights Index released by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) reported that Colombia is among the ten worst countries for working people, among other things for the culture of impunity that prevails for the murder of trade unionists¹. Colombian trade unions have reported that between January 1986 to March 2020, 3,069 unionists have been assassinated or disappeared. Another 3,000 received death threats. But despite the peace process, threats against trade unionists continue. For example, on October 26, death threats were sent to all 15 members of the Executive Committee of FECODE, the Colombian Federation of Education Workers, as well as to the President of the Trade Union Confederation (CUT). The threats took the form of a funeral wreath with the words "rest in peace" and came in the aftermath of national actions led by trade unions over the social, health, education and economic crisis in the country. Two weeks later, two teachers, both of them FECODE activists were murdered in Risalda and Nariño.

Furthermore, President Ivan Duque has taken advantage of the crisis caused by the pandemic to issue labour and pension reforms. For example, Decree 1174, approved on August 27, allows contracting workers by the hour, lowers legal protections and benefits for workers who make less than the minimum monthly salary, and removes the employers' obligation to assume social security payments. Decree 1174 comes into effect on February 1, 2021, effectively creating a parallel labour code, increasing precarious work, and undermining unionization in Colombia.

We unequivocally condemn the violence being perpetrated by state forces against trade union leaders, human rights defenders and oppressed communities. We respectfully ask that you implement the recommendations of the 2020 Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation in Colombia². It is critical that there be a full and independent investigation into the intellectual authors of crimes committed against social leaders; an intensification in implementation of the peace agreement, particularly in relation to human rights measures; re-initiation of peace talks with the ELN; and full accountability for all state actors involved in human rights abuses. We further ask that the Colombian government reinstate the precautionary measures that have been requested by the Interamerican Human Rights Commission to protect the physical integrity of teachers, and all trade unionists in the country.

¹ 2020 ITUC Global Rights Index, The World's Worst Countries for Workers, https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_globalrightsindex_2020_en.pdf

² 2020, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation in Colombia, <https://justiceforcolombia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/UN-human-rights-report-2020.pdf>

We thank you in advance for your consideration of this letter and look forward to further discussion in the future.

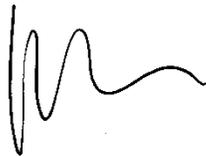
Sincerely,



Teri Mooring
BC Teachers' Federation



Mark Hancock
Canadian Union of Public Employees



Hassan Yussuff
Canadian Labour Congress



Harvey Bischof
Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation



Chris Aylward
Public Service Alliance of Canada



Ken Neumann
United Steelworkers

cc: Hon. François-Philippe Champagne, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Michael Chong, Shadow Minister of Foreign Affairs
Heather McPhearson, NDP Foreign Affairs Critic
Ambassador Marcel Lebleu
Embassy of Colombia in Canada
Trade Union Confederation of the Americas
Public Services International